

Chaney

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HOUSE UPON A ROCK

much of the vast acreage which Morhouse owned in and adjacent to Prairie Jefferson, later called Oak Ridge. In 1804, he received a deed to fifteen hundred acres of choice land situated between Bayou Gallion and Bayou Little Bonne Idee, on the northern boundary of Prairie Jefferson not far from John Coulter's property.<sup>17</sup> After Thomas died, his land was sold for taxes in 1819; but during the following year his family redeemed it.

Although a scarcity of sources precludes a particular account of his life, the known details indicate that William Thomas enjoyed the advantages of a fair education in his day, that he achieved prominence as a citizen, and that he served his church as a devoted and useful member. The official Spanish census of 1792 names Thomas among the residents of the Natchez District. Upon the creation of Pickering County, Mississippi, in 1799 (renamed Jefferson County in 1802), he took office as justice of the peace and of the court of common pleas. In 1798, the Salem Church selected him, along with several others, to assist in the organization of the Bayou Pierre Church, the second Baptist church in Mississippi.

Besides William Thomas, a number of other members of the Salem Church acquired property from Morhouse: Prosper King, 1,600 acres; John Burch, 600 acres; William Bolls, 500 acres. Likewise, in addition to Buckner Darden and James Bennett Truly, several persons linked with the prominent Curtis and Jones families, who were instrumental in organizing the Salem Church, secured land in or near the Thomas settlement. Most of them, at one time or another, were members of either the Salem Church or some other Baptist church in Mississippi.<sup>18</sup> In the wake of the economic problems created by the War of 1812, many landowners lost their property. Some of them returned to Mississippi. Prosper King was buried in the cemetery at the Salem Church in 1827. John Burch and William Bolls later preached in Mississippi, though it cannot be stated with certainty that they did so while at Prairie Jefferson nor that a church was organized there prior to statehood, since no known supportive documentation is extant.

In the meantime, toward the end of the Spanish regime in West Florida, where the predominantly English-speaking residents consti-

second minute book (1815-1834), p. 4: ". . . our old church book kept by William Thomas. . ." This second volume is in the archives of the Mississippi Baptist Historical Society at Clinton, Miss.

<sup>17</sup> Ouachita Parish Conveyance Records, Book Z<sup>1</sup>, p. 135; Book E, p. 428.

<sup>18</sup> John G. Jones, *A Concise History of the Introduction of Protestantism into Mississippi and the Southwest* (St. Louis: P. M. Pinckard, 1866), pp. 66-100; also see Greene, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-76.

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THE DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

tuted a nexus joining the American community in southwestern Mississippi and its counterpart in southern Louisiana west of the Mississippi River, an extraordinary stir took place. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Spain denied that the transaction included West Florida; hence that government, aware of a threat, tightened its grip over the area. As a result, the populace became increasingly restive. Under these conditions the Feliciana planters, mounting a mini-revolution, rose against their oppressors and drove them out. They then set up a mini-republic. Declared the Republic of West Florida in the fall of 1810, this area was annexed to the United States in December of that year and was included in the state of Louisiana when statehood was granted in April, 1812. The parishes carved out of West Florida have since been called the Florida Parishes. Over this region, all in all, have flown six flags.

Tradition has ascribed to Bailey E. Chaney, a member of the Salem Church in Mississippi, the honor of preaching, in West Florida, the first Baptist sermon in what is now the state of Louisiana. It has further declared that, for so doing, he suffered persecution, arrest, and imprisonment. Although this legend apparently has been based solely on the recollections of Chaney's aged widow in the late 1840's, there is little reason to doubt that the episode actually occurred; but precisely where and when it occurred is less certain.<sup>19</sup> Overlooking the fact that details differ in the several accounts, it seems likely that Chaney visited briefly and preached in the Feliciana section of West Florida, probably in what later became East Feliciana Parish. By the means of travel available to Chaney, East Feliciana was not "near Baton Rouge."<sup>20</sup> To pinpoint the exact time of that event is impossible, but it surely took place between 1798 and 1810. A date toward the end of that period is plausible, for then the Spanish authorities were most apprehensive about the loss of West Florida and the designs of the Americans against their territory.

From South Carolina, Bailey Chaney was the son of William Chaney, the first known deacon of the Salem Church. Bailey's wife Elizabeth was the daughter of William Ratliff. Both the Chaney and the Ratliff families lived in the Natchez District as early as 1792. Patriot, planter, frontier politician, and preacher, Bailey Chaney was a licensed minister, but there is no evidence that he ever sought or received ordination, that he organized a church, or that he served

<sup>19</sup> Bond, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>20</sup> John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists of Louisiana* (Shreveport: Executive Board, Louisiana Baptist Convention, 1923), p. 43.

as pastor of a church. Perhaps he attempted too much, or he could not make up his mind whether to be a preacher or a politician; indeed, he attempted both but probably achieved distinction at neither. In 1798, when many patriots assembled at Natchez to hoist the American colors and to celebrate the passing of that territory into American hands, they called upon Chaney to deliver a sermon. It was the first sermon preached in Mississippi under the Stars and Stripes. Chaney served in the Territorial Legislature of Mississippi in 1809, in 1813, and in 1814. In 1810, living in Franklin County, adjoining the southern boundary of Jefferson County, he owned nine slaves.<sup>21</sup>

Oddly enough, Chaney's name scarcely appears in the minutes of the Mississippi Association: once, in 1814, during the War of 1812, when he was selected as one of a committee of three to name six days during the year as days of "fasting, humiliation and prayer," to be observed throughout the remainder of the war; and again, in 1816, when he gave two dollars as an individual contributor to the foreign mission work of the Triennial Convention.<sup>22</sup> Chaney served for a time as clerk of the Salem Church. Eventually that church excluded him on charges of drunkenness and disorderly conduct, but in 1823 it restored him to fellowship and granted him a letter to unite with another Baptist church in Jefferson County. Now such an exclusion would be improbable. Then, curiously, in spite of the fact that little or no stigma was attached to social or moderate drinking, the churches usually looked sternly on drunkenness. To be sure, they meted out expeditious punishment to offenders, but they also forgave them quickly; today, by way of contrast, the churches sometimes forgive without punishing, sometimes neither punish nor forgive, and sometimes perhaps unwittingly punish by not forgiving. In 1824 the Salem Church resolved that "Brother Chaney be required to give up the Church Book."<sup>23</sup> He was not the first, nor the last, church clerk to feel that, even after his tenure ended, the minute book was his personal property.

A man of action, Chaney was a Diotrephees—enamored of the pre-eminence—who indeed wrestled with his psyche but who often responded easily to the dark attraction of many things controversial, sensational, or spectacular. To some extent pomp and circumstance

<sup>21</sup> Gillis, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Bond, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Salem Church minutes, April, 1824.

thrust a role upon him; nevertheless, as a historical figure in the burgeoning Baptist life of Mississippi and Louisiana through his furtherance of timeless Baptist teachings, he rightly won the praise of all who treasure religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

With the fact that Elizabeth Chaney, in the winter of her age and after the lapse of many years, idealized her lamented husband, few would want to find fault. But it is an exaggeration to say, whether the words are hers or those of her sincere but overeager interrogator, that Bailey Chaney "was prevented by death, and did not establish a church in Louisiana, which was a cherished object with him."<sup>24</sup> Chaney was still living in Franklin County in 1820.<sup>25</sup> There is no evidence that he ever lived in Louisiana. In a document recorded in 1828 in East Feliciana Parish, William Chaney attested an exchange of slaves between himself and Bailey on February 11, 1825.<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Chaney and other members of the family acquired property in East Feliciana Parish in the late 1820's and early 1830's. Bailey Chaney probably died between 1825 and 1828, before the family moved to East Feliciana Parish. To say that he had foibles is to say only that he was a man; to say that, despite them, in truth he tried is to say that he was a man of faith.

#### SOWING GOSPEL SEED

Several Baptist ministers in southwestern Mississippi undoubtedly preached in West Florida prior to statehood. A few or perhaps even all of them suffered a degree of persecution. Before the United States gained possession of West Florida, a pious old slave named Billy was not allowed to teach or to pray "vocally, even in his own hut."<sup>27</sup> One may conjecture that Thomas Mercer, responding to such conditions in the American settlements not far from his home in Amite County, Mississippi, ventured over the boundary into West Florida to preach to the distressed settlers. Mercer came to Mississippi from Georgia about the year 1800 or shortly thereafter. He was one of the founders of the Mississippi Association and was within its area the most popular evangelist of his time. A great lover of gospel music,

<sup>24</sup> Bond, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Irene S. and Norman E. Gillis, *Mississippi 1820 Census* (Baton Rouge, 1963), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> East Feliciana Parish Conveyance Records (Clerk of Court's Office, Clinton, La.), Book A, p. 431.

<sup>27</sup> *Latter Day Luminary* (Philadelphia), Vol. I, No. 2 (May, 1818), p. 93.